



## Embedded Students? Can Libraries Benefit from Students in Planning Library Instruction?

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### Abstract

This article discusses how students can be more integrated in developing library instruction and what advantages this can provide for librarians planning their teaching. The students seem to have a different starting point about the importance of the librarians' knowledge of the subject at hand, and whether or not library instruction should be an integrated part of the course.

**Keywords:** library instruction; teaching; embedded students; integrated teaching; generic skills; subject specific skills

### 1. Introduction

In the spring of 2018, the University of Agder started the course "humanists in practice" where students were given the opportunity of professional experience in different work places. The main goal of this was to strengthen the university's interaction with the local community as part of university strategy goals. Two of the students chose Agder University Library (AUL) as their place of work. These students will be referred to as interns in this article.

The interns were bachelor students of religion. They had chosen the library quite randomly and not because they aspired to be librarians. The interns were fairly young and inexperienced students who had not spent many years

at the university. They did not have clear expectations as to what kind of tasks they would be given and no strong wishes for what to learn. This is, the way the author sees it, a good opportunity of getting more information on how most students view the library and not just the ones who use it with enthusiasm every day. A lot of library research is based on students who do use the library. It is difficult to get in touch with the students who do not use the library. The question “are students doing well because they use the library or is it just the students who are doing well who use the library?” is a difficult one to answer. The informants had used the library, but not excessively. One of them had attended a library course before and the other one had not. Their use of the library had mainly consisted of visiting it as a place to study. The student intern who had participated in a library course had made a more extensive use of the library subject guides and other library resources. The intern who had attended the library course also said that she thought that this should be integrated in the semester plan of the subjects provided by the teacher, while the other student said that library courses should be booked by teachers when needed. They both said that after their practice in the library they had started using more the databases and had acquired a deeper understanding of how databases and searching work.

The interns were given different work tasks, like duties at the help desk, and clearing books from the shelves. As the interns were students of religion and not of librarianship, the most relevant work experience for them would be to learn the types of tasks a liaison librarian, or research librarian, could perform.

Therefore, to give them an idea of what type of work they would do as liaison librarians, they were challenged to make a library instruction course for students. This article will present the interns’ thoughts on learning and how they perceived library instruction as something of importance for students. This article aims to investigate how we as librarians can integrate students in our course planning and make the learning outcome more relevant. In other words: can libraries benefit from embedding students in their course planning and teaching activities?

## **2. Background**

In 2015 a study comparing integrated library instruction (LI) courses and open courses was carried out. It concluded that timing of LI seems to be of

great importance (Daland, 2015). However, it is not always possible to get the timing right. With two student interns working in the library, planning a course of their own, it seemed like a good opportunity to gain insight into how students themselves regard LI and how they could plan this.

Carol Kuhlthau has stated that information seeking is a primary activity of life (Kuhlthau, 2004, p. 13) making this an important skill to master, not only for students, but for everybody. Students need to be able to locate trustworthy sources and use these in an ethical manner. There are many theories of what students need and how they learn but gaining insight in their perception of this could be of great value to us as librarians.

Project Information Literacy (PIL) has gathered information from “22,000 ‘early adults’ enrolled in more than 89 U.S. public and private colleges and universities, community colleges, and 34 high schools” (Project Information Literacy, 2019). One of the main findings of the project indicates that students struggle with the amount and complexity of information and also with searching for information in a productive way. The students found that their research competencies from high school were inadequate for college work (Head, 2008, pp. 3–4).

The two interns were given a close follow-up as they planned their course. They attended and observed different courses given by library staff and had the possibility to consult the librarians as they planned their course. They were encouraged to be critical of what they observed and, if they found it fruitful, to make changes to how the instruction was planned and carried out.

One-shot instruction is a common challenge for teaching librarians. Where in other courses the students are meeting several times over the semester such that a sequential development of learning is ensured, library instruction is given only once, and with very little possibility of follow-up. This makes it difficult to ensure that the students are learning what we think we are teaching them. For the same reason it is also a challenge to know whether the students get what they need from library instruction.

Bøyum, Gullbekk, and Byström (2017) state that planning a one shot instruction would be best done in collaboration with academic staff and the academic community. But what happens if we include the students in the planning of library instruction?

### **3. Methodology**

This study is based on an interview with student interns in the library, observation of their work on developing a library course and finally a questionnaire to assess what they had learned and how they had planned their course.

The interns presented their course and were interviewed after their presentation. In addition, a survey was issued to them separately a few weeks later. This was done to get a deeper understanding of the answers they gave after the presentation and to give them the possibility of giving written feedback. The assumption is that it is easier to give critical feedback in writing than it is to do so face to face because of the balance of power in a professional relationship like this. An advantage of this is that the study will consist of a mixed method where the author can compare the initial interview, made with both students at the same time, to an individual survey. The survey may also have made it easier for the students to be honest in their response.

The initial conversation with the interns asked them questions about why they had chosen the library for professional practice, how they thought the library could best cooperate with the subjects and if they believed that closer integration with students when planning library instruction could be a fruitful approach.

The first interview was mainly to better understand the course the interns had planned, whereas the second one was to gain deeper insight into what the interns had made a priority.

After the interns finished their practice they presented the course and how they had planned it. They were asked some questions about how they had prioritised and planned. They agreed to answer some more questions after the librarians had had a chance to have a closer look at the course material they had provided. The initial plan was that the interns would be interviewed again, but due to one of them moving away and exams, they preferred to answer a survey about their course. That meant that the interview guide had to be changed into a survey, making for a delay in the data collection.

The written responses were collected using the survey programme SurveyXact. The survey consisted of some closed questions and some open text field. This was done in order to make it possible for the students

to answer in their own words and not to influence their answers with set alternatives.

The data is of course not sufficient enough to say something in general about how students consider library instruction, but it may make for some useful reflections as to how we can start to think about “embedded students” in addition to the more traditional “embedded librarians.”

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

“Embedded students” is a way of using the well-known term “embedded librarian” from another point of view. The term “embedded librarian,” has been adopted from the journalistic practice of embedding oneself into the daily activities of a specific group” (Zanin-Yost, 2017, p. 152). Several definitions have been given to the “embedded librarian” term, but the main idea is to be integrated with the user group one is trying to support. This article attempts to investigate if twisting this term into “embedded students” can create a gateway into new insights that could be further investigated.

Information literacy, like most other skills, contains a lot of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge was first identified as a phenomenon by Polanyi (1962) and has since been discussed many times as to how one can identify and access this knowledge.

As a new university student, learning how to learn and handling information is important. Tacit knowledge is problematic not only for the learner, but also for the teacher. Answering questions is seldom a problem for an experienced librarian, but when students are not able to formulate the question they have, it is more problematic. Working closely with less experienced information users may provide insight into what inexperienced students are not grasping.

There are several approaches to teaching information literacy. Bøyum et al. (2017) describe four different approaches to this. In this article we aim to investigate what students themselves consider to be the most fruitful approach and their thoughts on subject integration and the librarian’s knowledge. To do this we will analyse the course the interns planned and the response they gave to the survey issued to them, in the light of the model of the four approaches of Bøyum et al. (2017).

Bøyum et al. (2017) present four ways of giving library instruction, both subject specific and interdisciplinary. This article will attempt to apply this model onto the interns' course to investigate how they perceive library instruction and information literacy. Furthermore, it will be used to look into what this means for the requirements for the research librarians' competencies and knowledge.

Bøyum et al. (2017) present the technique approach (case 1), the problem approach (case 2), the coaching approach (case 3) and the negotiation approach (case 4). The model is divided into strong to weak integration and participation, and from interdisciplinary to multidisciplinary and general to practice based information literacy (Figure 1).

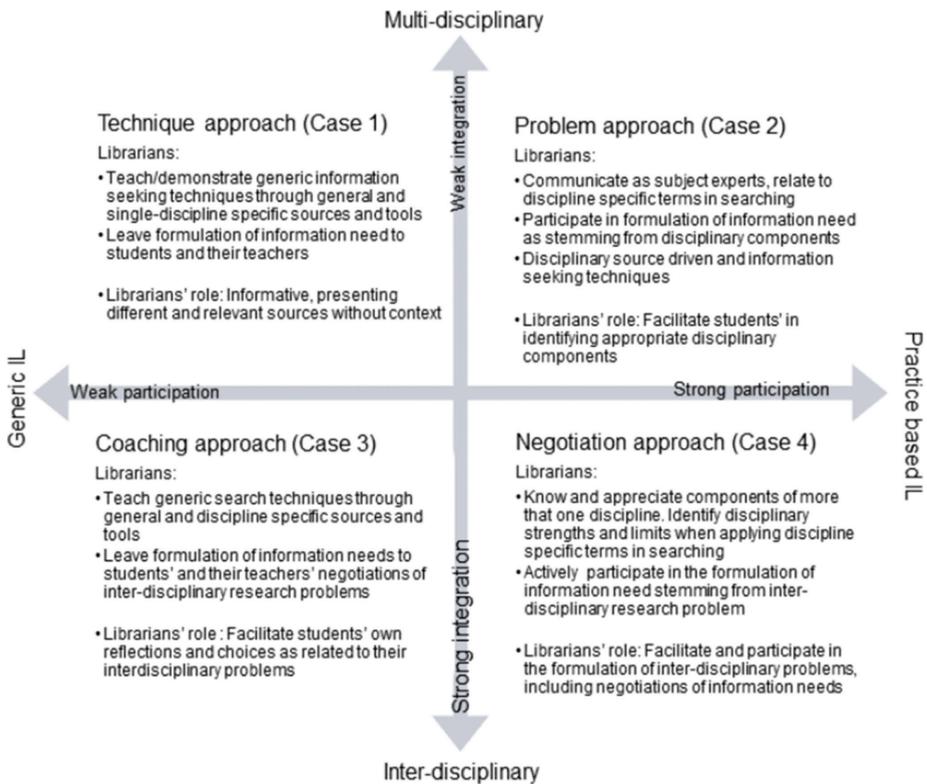
The technique approach focuses on generic skills and the subject integration is low. It can be exemplified by librarians presenting students with several different databases and leaving the actual use of it up to the students themselves.

The problem approach is used when the library instruction is connected to and integrated with the subject at hand. This is a situated and practice-based form of teaching information literacy. Librarians teaching IL in this way are concerned with the library instruction being integrated in the subject and the librarian having the knowledge and skills from that subject. However, in a multidisciplinary context some problems will emerge as the research librarian will know one of the subjects, but not all. This is considered to be a weak integration of subjects.

In the coaching approach the librarian's role is considered to be supportive even if the participation in the formulation of the information need is weak. Because the interdisciplinarity is strong, the pedagogical role of the librarian must be emphasised. The students are presented with several different sources to support an interdisciplinary result. The librarians are not participating in the integration work of the different sources and subjects but help facilitate it happening.

The negotiation approach is set in a situated, practice-based understanding of multidisciplinary and information literacy. In this approach it is expected that the librarian participates in integrating the subjects and in developing the student's articulation of their need of information.

Fig. 1: Bøyum et al.'s model of library instruction approaches.



Bøyum et al. (2017) also stress the need for a collaboration between librarians and teachers to plan LI courses, correlating with Annemaree Lloyd's understanding of information literacy as a situated and socio-cultural practice (Lloyd, 2007, 2010, 2012). This may be not only to secure the students learning outcome, but also to help the librarians learn and develop their IL skills and expertise.

## 5. Results

The interns presented the introductory course they had made to the librarians in charge of the project. They had made a PowerPoint presentation and a fact sheet about library services to hand out to the students.

Surprisingly the interns seemed to feel that the librarian's familiarity with and knowledge of the subject at hand was less important. They focused on presenting the databases that could be useful and on whether the students would be able to figure out the searching on their own after the instruction. The selection of databases was based on the most commonly used databases from the library website. Perhaps master students or Ph.D. students would have felt differently from the bachelor students, but this could also be due to the distinction that seems to exist between what they consider to be the specific academic work and library services.

The interns' fact sheet focused on the following:

- Most popular databases at the university
- The library catalogue – Oria
- Where can you find the databases on the university web page?
- Smart searching
- Searching
- Assignment for the students

They went on to present the library database in this way:

*Slide 1: In Oria you can find:*

- *Titles registered in the library catalogue*
- *Articles and audio from most of our electronic journal archives, databases and music archives*
- *In addition to a great deal of electronic sources from open archives*
- *Overview of the whole country's library titles*

The first slide focused on how the library catalogue was organised and where to find it. They also emphasised the different kinds of sources found in the catalogue.

*Slide 2: How to find databases*

In this slide the interns focused on how you could locate the different databases from the library web page. Further, they focused on advanced searching and using Boolean searches.

*Slide 3: Smart searching*

In their slide about smart searching the focus was on phrase searching, using synonyms, asterisks and parentheses when searching for information in addition to the possibilities for limitations on the search result. They also presented the successful search methodology (Daland, 2015; Daland & Hilde, 2016; Zins, 2000) that had been presented to them in one of the library courses they had attended.

Lastly the interns made an assignment for the course participants:

*Open task. Two students sit together. You are writing an assignment in religion. What databases would you choose to use and how would you search to find the right sources for your assignment?*

The interns also made a hand-out paper that they thought the library could issue to academic staff teaching students to market library services [authors' translation].

***Offers for Students from the University Library***

- *Many students at UIA do not really know what the library has to offer. Most students find out when they are writing their bachelor's or master's assignments. There is a great potential for improvement here. For example, lecturers can distribute information sheets to first-year students, so they become aware of what services from the library can be helpful to them. Here are some examples:*
- *There is a research librarian on the second-floor help desk (from 10-2) who can answer questions regarding assignments, a submission of a text or an examination. They can help you find articles relevant to your subject. A helpful tip is to come prepared, and to know what you are looking for, so that the process becomes easier.*
- *ORIA is the largest database at the university and could help you get an overview of what resources UIA actually has to offer. If UIA does not have a copy of the required book, you can borrow it from another library in the country. The book will be sent here, and you can get it at the library. Also, you can return it to any library in Norway.*
- *Many of the people working in the library offer courses in databases and many other things that might be useful for students. This will make it much easier to write an exam paper or whatever else one might need.*

- *Something a lot of students are struggling with is referencing. There are free EndNote courses at the library, and most are open courses so those who wish to register and participate can do so.*
- *The library spends millions annually on books and databases and much more, so that students can use this free of charge.*

From the outline of the planned course it was clear that the interns first and foremost focus on information and on an overview of what the library can offer. They seem enthusiastic about what the library can do to help and what services can be provided. The list of services is quite cursory and not directly connected to specific student tasks or assignments. This may be explained by the fact that the interns in question had not written an extensive academic assignment themselves. Master students or PhD candidates might perhaps have made a completely different overview.

One of the interns reported that she had attended library instruction before. They had both used the library before, as a place to study and to borrow books on their own using the self-help options of the lending machines. When asked if their strategies for obtaining information had changed after their time in the library they both said yes and explained that they were now more confident using databases and the library web page.

They both reported that they did not think it would be necessary for a librarian giving library instruction to be educated in the field they were supporting. This would perhaps have been different if we had asked academic staff or PhD-students. However, it is very interesting that the interns consider library instruction to be built on generic skills.

They both reported that participation in library instruction courses had been useful and that more students should attend courses like this.

They both said that the course they had made should be suitable for use in all subjects. They both reported that an embedded student would be a good idea for librarians planning library instruction. They also reported that library instruction should be integrated in the time table and preferably be made obligatory to students.

When asked what they had learned about the library during their time there, they both reported that they had learned that the library had more to offer

than they initially had thought and that the library played an important role for the university and for students learning.

## 6. Discussion

The model of Bøyum et al. (2017) indicates four different approaches to library instruction. We would place the intern course in the multi-disciplinary generic corner of “technique approach (case 1).” They stated that librarians do not need formal education in the field they are supporting in order to teach students information literacy skills. The skills needed are more concerned with technical skills of understanding and searching databases.

Lindauer (2004) makes the point that librarians should focus on assessing their own instruction practices, not just their actual training of users. Assessing library instruction will not only provide information about how the instruction was perceived by the participants, but it will also make room for reflection on librarians’ teaching practices and how to improve this.

What is interesting about this is that while librarians focus greatly on how we can integrate subject and library science/knowledge, the student interns seemed to consider this as two separate things. They focus on generic information literacy skills that can be applied to their information needs in any context.

Whether the librarians or the interns are right is difficult to say, but the difference of opinion is certainly interesting, and the question is why are we thinking differently about it? And what can we learn from the intern’s approach to library instruction? By embedding the student interns the librarians gained more information about student learning.

What seems to be an issue is the intern’s unfamiliarity with library skills and information literacy. They were both surprised by all the different tasks librarians handle as part of their job and they also said their way of obtaining information had changed after working at the library. One could ask if the integration of information literacy and the subject specific happens at a higher level of education. Perhaps master students or PhD-students would feel differently about this? And perhaps is it easier for bachelor students to

understand information literacy if it is presented separately and not integrated with the subject. It would be likely that the course would be given at a time that was beneficial to students working with an assignment. In this way it can be more actively connected to the subject at hand and the students could make the connections themselves. Bloom states that “Our general understanding of learning theory would seem to indicate that knowledge which is organized and related is better learned and retained than knowledge which is specific and isolated” (Bloom, 1956, p. 35). This indicates that some sort of integration between library instruction and the subject at hand could help and improve learning.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study implies that the integration or embedding of students in planning library instruction can provide useful insights and reflections. The study is small, and one cannot say something in general about how students consider learning and information literacy, but it may provide some new reflections and perhaps encourage further research on how students consider this.

The interns provided an outline for a course and a fact sheet about the library and its services. They don't seem to focus a great deal on the integration of library instruction, but they were still very enthusiastic about the library and convinced of the fact that library instruction was important for learning. Embedding students in planning library instruction can be an interesting way of making it more useful and motivating for students.

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